Unfriendly skies

The world is awash in missiles that can shoot down airliners. A fix is probably years away

REUTERS

Video of training session shows al Qaeda members practicing with a shoulder-fired missile.

BY SAMANTHA LEVINE

It's been five months now, but the chilling event still resonates throughout Congress and the Bush administration. Last Thanksgiving Day, terrorists launched two shoulder-fired SA-7 Strela missiles at an Israeli airliner taking off from Mombasa, Kenya, with 271 people on board. The missiles, which narrowly missed the plane, were from the same batch that were unsuccessfully fired at a U.S. military jet months earlier in Saudi Arabia.

Over the past three decades, portable antiaircraft missiles have played a significant role in wars from Chechnya to Angola. Today, though, the threat is much wider. A thriving black market for some 700,000 surface-to-air missiles has made it relatively cheap for terrorist groups, including al Qaeda and Hezbollah, to stockpile the weapons. The United States has contributed marginally to the supply of missiles, having sold more than 900 U.S.-made Stingers to Afghan militias fighting the Soviets between 1979 and 1988. Given the large number of missiles available, some experts say, it is astonishing more planes and passengers haven't been shot out of the sky. To date, 24 civilian aircraft have been downed by SAMs, resulting in the deaths of more than 500 people.

These heat-seeking missiles and their launchers are dangerous because they're small enough to fit into a car's trunk, weigh just 35 pounds, and require relatively little training to operate. They have a range of about 3 miles and can strike planes flying at up to 15,000 feet. Theoretically, that means they could be successfully fired from anywhere inside a 150-square-mile zone surrounding a commercial airport.

In search of answers. A bipartisan group in Congress has begun efforts to address the threat, but it won't be easy—or cheap. The lawmakers want to outfit 6,800 commercial jets—the entire U.S. fleet—with technology to defeat SAMs. But the technology isn't quite ready, and with a price tag of up to $10 billion, it won't be an easy sell. Congress is wrangling with staggering deficits and escalating bills for the war in Iraq. The airline industry is struggling to stay afloat—it just received a $2.9 billion federal bailout. The bottom line? The threat may be imminent, but a solution is probably years away.

Aviation experts have warned of the SAM danger for a long time, but it was the attempted attack in Mombasa that got official Washington's attention. Soon after, a federal task force was assembled to assess the vulnerability of 22 major American airports. The conclusions were sobering. In late March, Transportation Security Administrator James Loy told a House aviation subcommittee that the missile threat is "great" and "must be taken very seriously, everywhere." Since then, security has been stepped up in areas around major U.S. airports. Later this month, President Bush is expected to sign a bill requiring the Transportation Security Administration to study the adaptability of the military's antimissile technology for commercial use. Military aircraft already have systems that use flares or infrared lasers to jam the missiles' guidance systems. Air Force One and Israeli airliners are also widely believed to employ such systems, though no one in an official capacity will confirm it. Experts say there are still a host of technological challenges, though, to outfitting the entire commercial fleet with such hardware.

The TSA report is due out in early summer, but even if it concludes that installing the systems on U.S. airliners is a good idea, it's hardly a *fait accompli*. New York Rep. Steve Israel and California Sen. Barbara Boxer propose that the government pay to retrofit existing planes while the airlines spring for the equipment on new planes. The industry balks at that notion, saying protection against terrorism is a national-defense function that should be paid for by the taxpayers. Israel argues that the estimated $1 million-per-aircraft cost would barely be a dent in the price of a new plane: New Boeing 737s start at $41 million. "If, God forbid, a commercial airliner is shot out of the sky by a $5,000 missile," he says, "it would represent the final collapse of America's airline industry."

So Israel hopes his plan, or something like it, can win congressional approval. After all, he's not just a congressman. He's an airline passenger. Speaking from his car phone last week on his way to New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport for a flight to Phoenix, he said, "I hope I don't become Exhibit A in my own bill." ●

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NEW YORK REP. STEVE ISRAEL